

media salad

by Chuck Kleinhans

Notes on Marie Menken

A pioneer experimental filmmaker is remembered in *Notes on Marie Menken*, a feature-length documentary (97 mins., color and B&W, 2006) by Martina Kudlácek, distributed by First Run/Icarus Films. The film combines samples of Menken's short, intense lyrical films which influenced other makers such as Stan Brakhage (who honored her as the major influence on his own style), and interviews with friends who remember her life and work such as Kenneth Anger, Alfred Leslie, Peter Kubelka, Gerard Malanga and Jonas Mekas. Given her productive media output in the later 40s to the mid-60s in NYC, she moved in the artworld at a time of creative change. While it's interesting to see materials such as outtakes and unfinished footage from films that depict Menken, and some of her own seldom seen work, the interviews often ramble on and on and the overall effect, even for someone who admires Menken's films, such as myself, is unfocussed and undisciplined. Menken herself was fond of saying of films, "Make them short...always!" This film would have been much better at half the length.

There are a lot of absences here. Some footage of Menken that would have been nice in the film was probably unavailable or too expensive to acquire (such as from Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* and *The Life of Juanita Castro*). But the film also seems totally oblivious to Menken's position as one of the few women working in the avant garde film world at the time. What was it like for her? Did she have connections with other New York women filmmakers at the time such as Maya Deren and Shirley Clarke? She spent most of her artistic and social life initially as a fag hag with her husband, poet and filmmaker Willard Maas and his circle, and later as a member of the Warhol Factory crowd. What was that like for her? What was her social role with these gay guys? Did that shape her art? How? Given the major reconsideration of the major queer presence in the US experimental film scene that is represented by Juan Suarez, *Bike Boys*, *Drag Queens*, and *Superstars: Avant-garde, Mass Culture and Gay*

Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema (Indiana University Press, 1996), this neglect seems particularly obtuse.

Similarly, the film side steps the suicide by alcoholism that killed both Menken and Maas. And it never gives a good context for the span of her artistic career. Additionally it neglects key works and doesn't provide a critical assessment of her place in avant garde film history.

Her very short film, *Hurry Hurry*, combines microscopic film of human spermatazoa flailing about with a layer of flames while the audiotrack is the sound of a bombardment from a stock recording source. There's at least a hilarious proto-feminist statement there, that might relate to the story I heard about her marriage. Marie married Maas, essentially a has-been overblown poet, not knowing he was gay. Pregnant, and alone because he was out with the boys, she went into labor and ended up in the hospital with a very long and arduous birth process that ended in a miscarriage. Maas showed up the next day, hung over. As a Good Catholic Girl, she couldn't imagine divorce. The die was cast and she joined him in the downward spiral of alcoholism and quarreling. As a young aspiring writer, Edward Albee spent a lot of time with the pair and captured much of their relationship in his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Menken is long overdue for a critical reconsideration. Her lyrical films were put aside by the vogue for structural film and "new narrative" at the time of her death in 1970. And young film feminists couldn't quite see Menken as the kind of role model they were looking for. But the films remain fresh, exciting, and brilliant as lyrical expression, and, in the case of her film of Warhol at work, *Andy Warhol*, exciting and original documentary.

Marked Women

Russell Campbell. *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

Russell Campbell's study presents a rich investigation of the thematic, characterization, and narrative patterns used in representing prostitute characters in dramatic fictional film, internationally from its origins to the present. It presents a typology which characterizes the principal types of representation and elaborates variety within those types using both well known films and lesser known ones. Comprehensive (while not being bogged down in being totally exhaustive), it appropriately references most of the

major critical and scholarly discussion of these types, and does remarkable justice to divergent views of the prostitute as a genuine social figure as well as a figure in the creative imagination of artists and audiences.

The book clearly handles differences among feminists on issues involving sex workers: positions are fairly and judiciously indicated, and balance is maintained. Similarly, the views of other social reformers on the issue are dealt with efficiently (e.g., socialists who find prostitution a form of slave labor vs. anarchists who find it a form of female empowerment). The psychological dynamics of the prostitute as a male fantasy are clearly articulated (and mercifully with a minimum of psychoanalytic jargon).

Campbell produces an original analysis given the state of knowledge: early film and the silent era is referenced as known and available to contemporary researchers, for example. Latin American film is under-represented, but this is the state of scholarship and knowledge in the English speaking world. Some notable Asian cinema examples are missing without explanation. Some directions are left out: hard core pornography is rarely referenced given the number of prostitutes represented in the genre, and cheap exploitation films get scant mention.

The organization is outstanding: Campbell identifies key types of characters (Siren, Golddigger, Working Girl, Business Woman, etc.) and plot patterns (Love Story, Prostitute and Pimp, etc.) in films presenting prostitutes as central and sometimes peripheral characters. Thus the book sets the standard for future discussions of representations of prostitutes in film. Feminist scholars have discussed the femme fatale, for example, but largely in terms of specific actors presenting specific characters in specific films. This study provides the broad background for further discussion.

Because Campbell uses a rather narrow definition of prostitution (women who trade sex for money commercially with various clients) the book does not cover adjoining areas (e.g., women who are considered sexually loose and disreputable; sex industry workers such as entertainers, strippers, porn stars, etc; women who trade with only one man, etc.). However, the book is exhaustive within its set goal. And it then forms a standard for considering those other areas. Campbell does not deal with areas such as art history or drama or fiction, where feminist scholars in particular have discussed the prostitute as a significant representation (e.g., 19C French painting, or Zola's *Nana*). It doesn't deal at all with male prostitution. But the book would be twice as long if he tried to do all that as well.

Curiously, given the title of the volume, Charles Eckert's classic ideological analysis of *Marked Woman* ("The Anatomy of a

Proletarian Film: Warner's *Marked Woman*," available in Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods 2*) is not mentioned at all, while Karyn Kay's early discussion of that film is. Similarly, there is an extensive discussion of some of these films which he doesn't reference: e.g., there are about ten major feminist articles on *Jeanne Dielman* the author seems unaware of. And there is a book-length close analysis of Godard's *Two or Three Things* in English. But the overall topic is daunting in any case, and no one writer could be expected to cover it all without it being a lifetime project. All of which points to the remarkable durability of the prostitute as image, narrative character, and fantasy projection in film history.

Full disclosure: I first met Russell Campbell in the late 1970s when he was finishing his PhD on the US Film and Photo League of the 1930s at Northwestern University and I began teaching there. He worked on JUMP CUT before returning to New Zealand to teach. We've stayed in touch over the years. I was asked by the press to review the manuscript before its publication.

[To top](#) [JC 49](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).